Liberalism, Self-Respect, and Troubling Cultural Patterns in Ghettos

Forthcoming in *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth*, ed. Orlando Patterson and Ethan Fosse (Harvard University Press).

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Scattered across the metropolitan landscape of the United States are many segregated black neighborhoods with high-poverty rates (Wilson, 1987; Massey and Denton, 1993; Jargowsky, 1997; Sharkey, 2013). Social scientists, ordinary observers, and inhabitants of these spaces often refer to these stigmatized and deeply disadvantaged neighborhoods as "ghettos." Ghetto neighborhoods, in addition to their concentrated poverty, typically have a number of troubling characteristics—alarming rates of violence, street crime, joblessness, teen pregnancy, family instability, school dropouts, welfare receipt, and illicit drug use. Exactly why ghettos persist is, to put it mildly, a complex and controversial question. But many, from all sides of the political spectrum, think that at least part of the explanation has to do with destructive or self-defeating cultural patterns prevalent in ghettos.

In fact, some believe there is a "culture of poverty," or something similar, to be found in America's ghettos.[1] The culture of poverty hypothesis holds that because the segregated black urban poor have lived for so long under such miserable conditions, many (though not all) who live in ghetto neighborhoods have developed attitudes, practices, and self-concepts that inhibit their ability to improve their life prospects. Because of social distance or geographic isolation from mainstream institutions, these cultural traits are transmitted across generations and among peers in ghettos, so that many poor urban black

[1] The idea that there exists a culture of poverty is old. One can even find a version of it articulated in W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), with its emphasis on the cultural deficits of newly urbanized blacks, especially the so-called "submerged tenth." The phrase "culture of poverty" came into popular use because of the influence of Oscar Lewis's *Five Families* (1959), which focused on Mexican urban communities. The theory is developed in relation to the black urban poor in such well-known texts as Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962), Kenneth Clark's *Dark Ghetto* (1965), and Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965).

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children acquire them, often with catastrophic consequences. Indeed, some of these cultural currents are thought to contribute to perpetuating ghetto conditions and to have become formidable obstacles to ghetto residents to take advantage of the opportunities—say, in education and employment—that are available to them. In particular, some social bases of self-esteem that exist in ghettos would appear to have engendered dysfunctional social identities that, at least in the long run, lead to further impoverishment.

A number of social scientists that study urban poverty (including some in this volume) explicitly reject the culture of poverty hypothesis (e.g., Roach and Gursslin, 1967; Valentine, 1968; Corcoran et al, 1985; Wilson, 1987; Jones and Luo, 1999; Lamont and Small, 2006). They do not believe there is a culture specific to poverty, for the cultural responses to poverty vary enormously across time and place and between immigrants and natives even in ghetto neighborhoods. Today, many who do scientific cultural analyses of the urban poor (call them the "new cultural analysts") do not accept the idea that there is some totalizing or coherent subculture in poor black communities (Harding et al, 2010). While acknowledging the existence of salient and distinctive cultural patterns in ghetto neighborhoods, they emphasize that there is tremendous cultural heterogeneity even within the same poor black neighborhood. And the cultural traits that are prevalent among the ghetto poor are not generally a straightjacket from which they cannot escape but more often a set of frames or repertoires that the black poor draw on (sometimes implicitly) to navigate their social environment and to make sense of their lives.

Moreover, apart from these empirical and conceptual disagreements, the new cultural analysts reject the label "culture of poverty" because of its misleading associations and political baggage. They are particularly skeptical of those who use the culture of poverty idea to blame the black urban poor for their circumstances and to absolve government of any responsibility for alleviating the plight of the black poor. New cultural

analysts often leave open the question of who is, ultimately, responsible for the disadvantages the ghetto poor face, and even when they do make claims about responsibility, their analyses are generally compatible with government having an obligation to improve the life prospects of the black urban poor. In addition, few believe that the cultural traits of the ghetto poor are the primary causal determinants of the persistence of ghettos or that these traits operate independently of structural factors. Lastly, new cultural analysts rarely invoke the language of "pathology" or "dysfunction" when describing the cultural patterns of the black poor. Indeed, some think that the cultural traits prevalent among the ghetto poor enable them to survive in their social environment.[2]

Still, there are contemporary social scientists and certainly many in the broader public that believe cultural factors help to explain ghetto poverty, even if they insist that structural factors have equal or greater explanatory significance. Among those who think there are cultural aspects to ghetto poverty, some believe there are cultural traits associated with ghettos that hurt poor ghetto residents' chances of improving their lives through mainstream institutions and conventional paths of upward mobility. The issue, then, is not cultural divergence from convention per se. It is that such divergence leads to significantly reduced life prospects given the patterns of social organization typical of contemporary liberal-capitalist societies. What those who take this position today have in common with some older culture of poverty theorists is the following belief: *a significant segment of the ghetto poor diverge culturally from mainstream values and norms and this divergence generally inhibits their upward mobility or escape from poverty*. I will call this the "suboptimal cultural divergence hypothesis" (or "cultural divergence thesis" for short).

[2] The substantive differences between the new cultural analysts and Oscar Lewis (the originator of the concept "culture of poverty") may not be so stark. For a defense of the view that the classic culture of poverty theory, as articulated by Lewis, has been subject to gross distortion and misrepresentation, by those on the left and the right, see Harvey and Reed, 1996.

Many social scientists are careful not to make, or even to imply, value judgments about the subjects they study. In their role as empirical researchers, they do not presume to tell the poor (or anyone else) how they ought to live or what they should value. Though perhaps personally motivated by a desire to reduce poverty or even by egalitarian concerns, in their vocation as scientists many take themselves to be providing empirical analyses of ghetto poverty that show the relationship between cultural processes and structural factors. There are of course some social scientists, particularly those that make policy recommendations, who are not reluctant to make value claims or to rely on what they take to be widely held and sound normative judgments. But even here, the normative claims are rarely defended and sometimes are not stated but only implied. Or the inferential links between analytical claims, empirical conclusions, normative assumptions, and policy prescriptions are not explicitly or carefully articulated.

For purposes of this chapter, I will assume the cultural divergence thesis is basically sound. I don't claim to know that the thesis is true and offer no defense of it. But I believe it is a plausible, widely held, and empirically grounded hypothesis worth taking seriously and seek to evaluate some practical prescriptions premised on it. My principal concern will be with what should, and what should not, be done if the thesis is true. Specifically, I will draw out and reflect on the normative implications of one possible practical response to suboptimal cultural divergence among the ghetto poor. This response, which I will call "cultural reform," is to intervene in the lives of poor ghetto residents to shift their cultural orientation away from these suboptimal traits toward ones that will aid their exit from poverty. To many who care about the plight of the ghetto poor, the need for cultural reform may seem obvious. However, as I will argue, many kinds of cultural reform cannot be adequately justified to the ghetto poor, particularly those forms that entail government involvement in the reform effort. The focus of this chapter will be on the practical limits,

moral permissibility, and overall wisdom of state-sponsored cultural reform. I'm particularly concerned with its compatibility with liberal-egalitarian values. I begin by further clarifying what I take the cultural divergence thesis to entail and what cultural reform might involve.

1. The Suboptimal Cultural Divergence Hypothesis

While middle- and working-class blacks often live in or adjacent to ghettos and may exhibit suboptimal cultural patterns, I will focus my attention on the black poor who have resided in ghettos for significant periods of time. I'll refer to this group as "the ghetto poor." Non-poor blacks are often exposed to cultural dynamics in ghettos (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999), and some of what I will go on to say will be pertinent to them. But the plight of the ghetto poor is so dire and morally urgent that many believe it is permissible (if not obligatory) to intervene in their lives in ways that would not be justified with respect to the non-poor.

The category "ghetto poor" is defined in terms of a structural location within U.S. society. Specifically, membership is constituted by a person's racial classification (black), class position (poor), and residential neighborhood (ghetto). The group is *not* defined by shared cultural characteristics (real or imagined). The term "ghetto poor" is not meant as a (more palatable) synonym for "underclass," which is sometimes defined partly in terms of behavioral or cultural traits. And there is no suggestion that the ghetto poor represent a cohesive cultural group or share a unique subculture.

Moreover, the version of the cultural divergence thesis that I will consider does not assert that it is a characteristic feature of poor black people in ghettos that they possesses a set of debilitating cultural traits. It is now widely acknowledged among cultural analysts that there is considerable cultural diversity among the poor in these neighborhoods. It cannot be said that all or even most of the ghetto poor are in the grip of a self-defeating

culture, since many can be characterized as having resisted its pull and many hold to mainstream beliefs and values (Newman, 1999; Anderson, 1999; Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Young, 2006; Smith, 2007). Even those among the ghetto poor who do diverge from the cultural mainstream are not a culturally homogeneous group, as they often diverge in different ways and to different extents.

However, one can agree that many (perhaps most) poor blacks in ghettos hold mainstream beliefs and values and yet maintain that an alarming number do not and that, moreover, this divergence from the mainstream negatively impacts their life prospects (Vaisey, 2010). One might also worry that while some among the ghetto poor have so far evaded the grasp of these suboptimal cultural patterns, they are especially vulnerable to succumbing to the negative influence of these patterns; and perhaps all black youth residing in or near ghettos, whatever their class background, are vulnerable to being ensnared. Thus although, strictly speaking, not all poor black residents of ghettos are currently in need of cultural reform, they might be viewed as a "high-risk" group that cultural reformers may seek to target.

In the version of the cultural divergence thesis that I want to discuss, some of the attitudes and practices among the ghetto poor are viewed as cultural adaptations or strategic responses to severely disadvantaged conditions.[3] They are learned adjustments to socioeconomic hardship and social exclusion. Weak and strong versions of this claim have been defended. In the weak version, some poor denizens of ghettos may have developed

[3] It is worth noting that there are advocates of the suboptimal cultural divergence thesis who do not believe that this subculture is, or ever was, an adaptation to poverty, slavery, or to unjust conditions. For example, Thomas Sowell (2005) has argued that black ghetto culture is actually the remnants of Southern white "redneck" culture, which has its origins in those regions of the British Isles from which white American Southerners came. The cultural traits that Sowell attributes to blacks in the ghetto (and to poor rural whites) are much the same as those cultural of poverty theorists attribute to poor blacks. Charles Murray (1984), by contrast, has argued that a culture of poverty, both in black ghettos and white slums, arose as a response to liberal welfare policies that encouraged the poor to depend on federal aid rather than strive to be economically self-sufficient. These antipoverty policies, he claims, created perverse incentives that led to a dramatic rise in non-marital births, family breakdown, crime, and other social ills. I will not discuss these variants of the cultural divergence thesis, but much of what I will go on to say will, I believe, hold true even if one of these variants is correct.

ghetto-specific cultural traits but would give them up if they believed they had real opportunities to succeed in mainstream society. For such persons, these cultural traits are (more or less) consciously adopted strategic responses to a perceived lack of opportunity. For instance, William Julius Wilson (1996: 63-64) notes that it might be rational to observe ghetto norms to get by on the mean streets of urban America but that these norms are not conducive to success in the wider society (also see Wilson, 2009). He insists that if poor black men and women were provided the job training and employment that would enable upward mobility, most would choose to abandon ghetto-specific cultural traits.

If the weak version of the cultural divergence thesis is correct, cultural reform might nevertheless seem apt. Though there may be some who would be *willing* to abandon ghetto-specific cultural traits if provided adequate opportunities in mainstream society, they may find it very difficult to fully leave behind their suboptimal cultural traits without outside intervention. Cultural traits can become pre-conscious habits or implicit frames ("second nature," as we say), which agents find difficult to detect in themselves or to break (e.g., certain speech patterns, worldviews, or modes of bodily comportment). Even if they can shed their suboptimal cultural traits on their own, some may need help acquiring the needed mainstream traits—the relevant cultural competence—that would facilitate their upward mobility. Moreover, it may not be feasible to create a fair opportunity structure or an equitable distribution of resources any time soon. In the meantime, some might be able to escape poverty if they successfully underwent cultural reform, which would enable them to take better advantage of the meager opportunities currently available.

According to the strong version, the relevant divergent cultural patterns may have started out as mere adaptive strategies for survival under hardship, but some have now come to accept these traits as legitimate culture. In effect, the suboptimal cultural traits are sometimes taken on as a positive identity. The cultural characteristics in question "have a

life of their own," that is, they are self-perpetuating and, in the absence of outside intervention, will likely remain stable (at least for some time) even in the face of growth in educational and employment opportunity, redistributive policies, and effective anti-discrimination law.

It is of course possible that, just as there are many among the ghetto poor who do not diverge significantly from the cultural mainstream, there are some from this group to whom the weak divergence thesis applies and some to whom the strong version does. If we treat the strong and weak versions of the cultural divergence thesis as claims about a significant *portion* of the ghetto poor rather than claims about the ghetto poor in general, as I will here, then there is no need to view the two versions of the thesis as incompatible. Moreover, I make no claims about what percentage of the ghetto poor fall into the mainstream, weak divergence, or strong divergence categories, assuming only that a non-negligible number fall into each.

2. Which Cultural Traits Are We Talking About?

There is much disagreement about which cultural patterns prevalent in ghettos are suboptimal from the standpoint of the ghetto poor's socioeconomic prospects. However, relying on the work of influential proponents of the cultural divergence thesis (Harrington, 1997; Clark, 1965; Moynihan, 1967; Rainwater, 1970; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Sullivan, 1989; Majors and Billson, 1992; Anderson, 1999; Patterson, 2000; McWhorter, 2006; Patterson, 2006; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008), it is possible to draw up a list of candidates. Some cultural analyses suggest that some among the ghetto poor have a value-orientation that is in opposition to or incompatible with many conventional measures of success or that disdains what they perceive as "white" paths to success. So, for example, some among the ghetto poor are said to lack conventional occupational ambition or to reject the American

work ethic in favor of excessive idleness. Some cultural analysts insist that there are many among the ghetto poor who have hostility or skepticism toward formal education (though perhaps "street wisdom," autodidacticism, or folk knowledge is valued instead). There is said to be pessimism, even fatalism, about the prospects for upward mobility through mainstream channels. Some in ghetto communities are believed to devalue traditional co-parenting and to eschew mainstream styles of childrearing. Many of the ghetto poor are thought to distrust established authority, particularly officials of the criminal justice system but also clergy and educators; and this attitude is often accompanied by a belief that such authority is corrupt and so unworthy of respect. The ghetto poor, particularly poor black youth, are sometimes portrayed as regarding the use of vulgar language (e.g., "nigger" and "bitch") and street vernacular as appropriate in contexts where such modes of expression are widely viewed as uncivil and offensive.

In terms of what is accepted and sometimes valued, many among the ghetto poor are said to have a hedonistic orientation toward intense and immediate pleasure—e.g., through frequent casual sex, gambling, drinking, fighting, and recreational drug use—joined with a refusal to delay such gratification and a high tolerance for risk. Many, especially black boys and young men, are thought to regard promiscuity and sexual infidelity as morally acceptable, and they attach little or no stigma to teenage pregnancy, non-marital childbearing, paternal desertion, or single-mother households. Many are said to be oriented toward crude materialism and leisure and to seek personal prestige through the conspicuous consumption of luxury items and high-status brands. Street crime and interpersonal aggression are tolerated and sometimes embraced, including a readiness to use deception, manipulation, and even violence to achieve one's aims.

Not all of the values allegedly suboptimal for the ghetto poor contrast sharply with the mainstream. The relevant cultural divergence may not be a matter of the values

themselves but the way they are held (e.g., tenaciously or weakly); the priority they are given in practice; the way they are interpreted; or the context within which they tend to be expressed and acted on (e.g., at work and school rather than at home and in recreational spaces). For example, patriarchal conceptions of masculinity, anti-intellectualism, and materialism are widespread in American society, cutting across lines of race, class, and place. But some among the ghetto poor are believed to enact these values and norms in extreme ways, to give these values and norms much greater precedence in their lives than the average American, to interpret them in non-standard ways, or to invoke them in inappropriate contexts. In such cases, the divergence from the mainstream is not a matter of the content of the values and norms but the manner in which they are adopted and understood and their role in practical deliberation.

Recall that according to the weak version of the cultural divergence thesis, these cultural traits are components of a repertoire or part of a conceptual frame that agents strategically deploy to advance specific purposes in particular contexts. On the strong version, the traits in question represent fundamental commitments and may form part of the agent's social identity. We can regard a person's ghetto-oriented and suboptimal beliefs, values, and practices as constituting a *ghetto identity* if: (a) they figure prominently in the person's positive self-concept; (b) they are relatively stable across different social contexts (i.e., there is little or no situational code switching); and (c) the agent is resistant to changing them as a matter of principle. Thus, on the strong view, even given a chance to attend (or send their children to) a high-quality and racially integrated school, to obtain a well-paid non-menial job, or to move to a low-poverty and racially integrated neighborhood, many ghetto residents would still cling to their "ghetto" identities.

Some cultural practices prominent in American ghettos have symbolic and expressive dimensions—e.g., music, visual art, dance, humor, creative linguistic practices,

and clothing and hair styles—that cannot be reduced to or explained by ghetto poverty (Lott, 1992; Rose, 1994; Kelley, 1997; Perry, 2004; Rose, 2008). These expressive and aesthetic traits draw on and extend black cultural traditions that can be traced back for generations prior to the formation of the modern ghetto, and blacks who have never lived in a ghetto or even been poor value and participate in them, along with many who are neither black nor poor. In addition, some dimensions of ghetto cultural life, while perhaps in some sense a collective response to ghetto conditions, have political meaning or intent and so are not simply a matter of coping with, adapting to, or surviving the conditions of poverty. Some rap music, for instance, offers social critiques of ghetto conditions and expresses a spirit of resistance to the structures and dynamics that reproduce these horrendous circumstances (Rose, 1994; Shelby, forthcoming). Those who advance the cultural divergence thesis need not deny that the cultural traits of ghetto denizens include such expressive, aesthetic, or political elements, but some may regard them as suboptimal insofar as they inhibit upward mobility among the black poor or spatial mobility out of the ghetto. Consequently, some cultural reformers may seek to limit their influence on the ghetto poor, particularly on black children. Certain strands of hip-hop culture are often targets of cultural reform.

Proponents of the cultural divergence thesis do not generally equate "ghetto identity" with "black identity." To be sure, it is said that poor urban blacks developed and value these cultural traits and that the relevant traits draw on, or have an affinity with, familiar black traditions and folkways. Nevertheless, it is often claimed that those who have a ghetto identity define themselves, not only in opposition to mainstream American culture, but often in opposition to self-concepts associated with blacks who are successful by conventional measures or who attained their success through mainstream avenues. Insofar as a ghetto identity is regarded as "black," it should be thought of as a subspecies or mode of blackness that many who identify as black reject. Within black vernacular, blacks readily

distinguish between "ghetto blacks," "working-class blacks," and "bougie blacks," and these designations (which are sometimes used as epithets) are meant to track race, class, place *and* culture (Miller, 2008; Farhi, 2007). Moreover, many black Americans who think of themselves as having a strong black cultural identity accept (and perhaps lament) the cultural divergence thesis. For instance, in a recent PEW Forum survey (2007), in response to the question "Have the values of middle class and poor blacks become more similar or more different?" 61 percent of blacks answered "more different." Indeed, many actively participate in cultural reform efforts as part of a program of racial uplift.[4]

3. Cultural Reform

Confronted with compelling evidence in support of the cultural divergence hypothesis, some might acknowledge that cultural change in ghetto neighborhoods is needed but recoil from the idea that *government* should play an active role in bringing about such changes—that is, apart from making necessary structural changes in the laws and institutions that negatively affect the lives of the urban poor. The approach I want to consider would be less reticent about getting the government involved in effecting cultural changes in the lives of the ghetto poor. Indeed, it might be thought that such state intervention is essential if ghetto poverty and its associated social ills are to be adequately addressed.

Cultural reform should be distinguished from mere behavior modification. The state might try to change the behavior of the ghetto poor without attempting to change their cultural traits, regarding any cultural changes that do occur as unintended byproducts or side effects of intended behavioral changes. For instance, the state might use incentives or penalties to induce behavior thought to be more conducive to upward mobility. If refusing to work or using illegal drugs is believed to contribute to poverty, then the government

[4] For discussions and critiques of black elite advocacy of cultural reform, see Dyson, 2005; Pattillo, 2007: chap. 2; Cohen, 2010: chaps. 2-3.

might step in to penalize such behavior with the hope that poor people will choose to work and abstain from illicit drug use. This would be behavior modification, not cultural reform. With behavior modification, there need not be a presumption that the undesirable behavior is part of a learned cultural pattern or cultural identity. The behavior may simply be, for instance, the result of individual (rational or irrational) decision-making or habit. If there is a pattern of such behavior in a group, this may simply be a reflection of similar decision-making or errors in practical reasoning among those in the group.

By contrast, cultural reform is premised on the assumption that the relevant behavioral changes will only occur, or are more likely to occur, or will be more durable if some cultural traits are modified. Here there is a presumption that the suboptimal behavior in question is shaped or influenced by a set of cultural patterns. Thus the cultural reformer would harness the power and resources of the state to bring about the desired cultural changes.

There are at least three types of cultural changes that might be sought, each with different normative implications. The first and least radical would be *cultural augmentation*. Here the cultural reformer seeks to add to the cultural repertoire of the ghetto poor without attempting to remove or alter any of their existing cultural traits. The idea would be to equip poor blacks with some mainstream cultural tools (sometimes called "cultural capital"), which they could then choose when and whether to use and what ends to put them to. Their prior cultural attachments, whatever they happen to be, would not then be threatened. The second and more radical change is *cultural removal*. This would involve eliminating or neutralizing any existing cultural traits believed to be suboptimal. This type of intervention would not however involve instilling new mainstream cultural traits. Cultural removal would work best if, as some cultural analysts insist, most among the ghetto poor *already* embrace mainstream cultural values and norms. Simply removing or

defusing any suboptimal traits might then be sufficient to put them on a path out of poverty. The most radical approach to cultural reform would be *cultural rehabilitation*. It would combine cultural augmentation with cultural removal—getting rid of existing suboptimal traits and replacing them with mainstream cultural traits.

Which *types* of cultural traits are targets for cultural reform? The particular traits identified for augmentation or removal will affect how controversial and potentially problematic the mode of cultural reform would be. Attempts to change shared *beliefs* among the ghetto poor would be the least controversial, provided the beliefs in question pertain to matters of fact (rather than to what is desirable or valuable) and provided the beliefs are not religious views. For example, if some among the ghetto poor share the belief that formal education will not improve their life prospects or that there are no decent jobs available to them, and if this belief is factually incorrect, then a cultural reformer might try to change this erroneous perception or to prevent its spread.

The cultural reformer might also attempt to change the *skill set* of those targeted for reform. Some cultural analysts maintain that the cultural repertoire of poor blacks includes a set of social skills for operating in ghettos. But these ghetto-specific skills may not be helpful in the wider world and, deployed in the wrong context, may hurt one's chances of success in mainstream society. Effectively navigating the mainstream social world so as to improve one's socioeconomic situation also involves the deft deployment of cultural skills. Insofar as the ghetto poor lack these skills, the cultural reformer might seek to impart them. This type of cultural augmentation is, at least in principle, unobjectionable. Once acquired, the agents can decide whether to make use of this practical know-how and for what purposes, and they can continue to rely on their ghetto-specific know-how if they so choose.

Cultural de-skilling would be another matter. A person can lose an acquired skill if he or she does not use it enough. Either the ability degrades over time or one forgets how to

deploy it properly. So de-skilling may be possible if the ghetto poor were deprived of opportunities to use their ghetto-specific skill set or were prevented from drawing on it. Unless the ghetto poor voluntarily went along with this, such a practice, given the constraints it would impose on them, would raise serious questions about the legitimacy of the state's interference with their liberty.

Some customs—shaking hands, saying "thank you," making eye contact, smiling, enunciating words—become *habits*. The cultural reformer may therefore seek to change some cultural habits, either instilling new habits or breaking old ones. Many customs are preconscious or second nature and performed almost involuntarily. Given how difficult it is to control or break a habit once it has formed, the cultural reform of habits could prove morally problematic.

Even more controversial would be attempts to change the *values* or *cultural identities* of the ghetto poor. Getting into this sensitive terrain might however seem unavoidable. Some of the relevant cultural traits that appear to be least optimal (if not destructive)—again, from the standpoint of escaping poverty—do not have to do with factual beliefs, cultural skills, or customary practices. They have to do with ideals and values, with what *ends* are desirable and worthwhile. What constitutes a "good job"? What constitutes "success" in life? What does it mean to be a "responsible parent"? Is it wrong to smoke marijuana or to use cocaine? Do police officers and laws deserve our respect? These and similar questions turn on matters of value. They are normative questions. It is difficult to see how cultural reform could be successful and yet avoid such questions entirely.

Once we know what kind of cultural change is sought and which types of cultural traits are targeted for change, we still need to know which age groups should be targeted. Pre-adolescent children are the most malleable, so they might seem like the best candidates. Even teenagers in early adolescence (ages 10-15) may seem promising if more challenging.

Provided their parents are adequately informed about and consent to the programs, such initiatives are permissible, even if cultural reform takes the form of cultural rehabilitation. Though parental authority and family autonomy have their limits and can be overridden where there is child abuse, endangerment, or neglect, within these parameters they should be respected. If a parent wants to enroll his or her child into a program or school that engages in cultural reform, this would not be any worse than when parents send their kids to a religious or boarding school.

Things get more complicated with late adolescents (ages 16-17) and young adults (ages 18-25). Given their cognitive, emotional, and moral development and the imperative to teach them to run their own lives, late adolescents, though not adults, are properly accorded autonomy over significant domains of their lives (Schapiro, 1999). They are also expected to take full responsibility for many of the outcomes of their choices, even when these choices could adversely affect their futures. This is widely acknowledged, even by the U.S. government, as late adolescents are permitted to drop out of school, to accept employment, and to operate motor vehicles, and are sometimes subject to criminal prosecution as adults. Young adults (assuming no serious mental illness or debilitating cognitive disabilities) are rightly treated as fully competent to govern their lives, with all the rights and responsibilities this entails.[5] Thus, cultural reform directed at late adolescents and young adults is potentially more problematic than reform directed at young children. I will leave aside older adults, since they are unlikely to be viewed as good candidates for cultural reform.

Before offering a more in-depth treatment of the practicality and moral permissibility of cultural reform, I need to outline the particular methods and techniques the state might use or sponsor to bring about the relevant changes. The cultural

[5] Despite having the right to vote and enlist into the military, 18-20 year-olds do not have the right to buy alcoholic beverages in the United States. I leave this controversial exception aside.

augmentation of factual beliefs through the provision of information is the most benign. Few would object to this, provided it is based on sound scientific research and is devoid of the deception and manipulation characteristic of commercial advertising and political ads. Attempting to eliminate the false factual beliefs of the ghetto poor through information isn't problematic either.

Things get more complicated with instruction and training programs. Teaching involves the provision of information and dissemination of knowledge but generally goes well beyond this. It can entail skills training, inculcating desirable habits (or breaking undesirable ones), instilling values, and shaping identities. The relevant skills, habits, and values can perhaps sometimes be imparted through lectures, discussion, and the distribution of information. But sometimes a more directive and supervisory approach is the only effective method.

Counseling could also be used as a cultural reform technique. Such counseling might be no more than advice and encouragement, and so almost as benign as the provision of information or the intervention of a friend. But the counseling could take a more explicitly therapeutic form, in which the client is expected to submit to the direction of the counselor. The counseling could also be faith-based, in which non-rational means of persuasion are used (e.g., the exploitation of guilt or intimations of divine disapproval and sanctions). Would therapeutic or spiritual counseling be problematic as a technique of cultural reform? Much will depend on the power relationship between the counselor and the client and on whether the client has a choice in whether to seek the type of counseling in question. If poor blacks seek counseling because they believe they have suboptimal cultural traits and think counseling would help to change these, then there is little reason to object to the practice.

Of course, if providing useful information, voluntary educational and training programs, and voluntary counseling services were all that were needed to bring about the

relevant cultural changes, cultural reform would not raise such difficult moral questions. A more aggressive approach may appear necessary, however. The cultural traits targeted for change may be recalcitrant, and those individuals singled out for cultural change may not be disposed to participate in the relevant programs. Even those who do choose to participate may not continue with them long enough or may not fully cooperate with those running the programs. This naturally raises the issue of the permissibility of incentives and sanctions.

Incentives, particularly financial ones, may seem benign. However, when they are offered to the poor, especially to those severely disadvantaged, they can be morally troubling. When one is socioeconomically disadvantaged and in need of basic resources, it can be very difficult to turn down a financial offer, especially if one has dependents in need of things you cannot provide. Thus, many among the ghetto poor might participate in cultural reform programs, not because they see their value and just need a little nudge, but because they desperately need socioeconomic resources. Depending on their alternatives, they may be effectively compelled to submit to cultural reform even if they regard it as demeaning or insulting.

The imposition of sanctions or penalties raises the most serious worries. Not only might the ghetto poor object that they are being forced to submit to a demeaning cultural reform process; they might also object to any suffering, unpleasantness, indignities, or loss of liberty such penalties would involve. Pointing out that this is for their own good is unlikely to be an adequate response to these complaints.

4. Moral Reform

Relying on distinctions outlined in the previous section, I will largely restrict myself to examining the normative and practical implications of one particular type of cultural reform, which I will designate "moral reform." Moral reform goes beyond correcting

mistaken cultural beliefs or expanding the cultural repertoire of the ghetto poor. It is a form of cultural rehabilitation that targets not only beliefs and skills but also habits, values, and identities. The public policy goal of moral reform is both to alter the cultural traits of the ghetto poor by severing or weakening their attachment to suboptimal cultural traits and to instill mainstream cultural traits in those who lack them or to strengthen their attachment to these traits when there is only a weak commitment to them.

The relevant mainstream cultural traits include a value-orientation toward and commitment to hard work, thrift, economic self-sufficiency, delayed gratification, academic achievement, civility, respect for authority, moderation in drink and play, reverence for the institution of marriage, and responsible reproduction and good parenting. Though moral reform is sometimes directed toward young children, I will focus on moral reform directed at late adolescents and young adults (often designated as "youth"), as this raises the most interesting moral issues.

Moral reform might be accomplished through a number of government directed or community-based but publicly funded measures. The kinds of policies, programs, and techniques I have in mind include the following.[6] Moral reform could involve making work or job training a condition for receiving public aid with a view toward instilling an appropriate work ethic, labor-force attachment, and the value of economic self-sufficiency. Such a program could include empowering social workers with the authority to regulate the lives of those who rely on public assistance. For example, they might threaten to withhold or cancel benefits for those who refuse to adhere to work requirements. The government could criminalize "vices" associated with a suboptimal ghetto lifestyle (e.g., drug use, gambling, and prostitution) or make the abandonment of such practices a condition for housing assistance or other aid. Programs could be established that exhort and counsel the

[6] For defenses of such measures, see the essays in Mead, 1997. Also see Kaus, 1992.

ghetto poor to make more responsible choices (e.g., about reproduction, marriage, and parenting). Moral reform could involve moving poor people out of ghettos to low-poverty neighborhoods with the expectation that they will come to absorb values and norms of conduct prevalent in these more advantaged communities. The ghetto poor might be given middle-class mentors and role models so that they might come to assimilate mainstream norms and to develop cultural capital. The state might enable greater involvement of faith-based institutions or clergy in the lives of the ghetto poor with the expectation that certain religious beliefs and values might take (stronger) root.[7]

One important thing to keep in mind about such programs and policies is that even when they take the form of incentives and sanctions the point of moral reform is not simply to modify behavior but *to restructure the soul*—to change fundamentally the values, character, and identity of those in the grip of what are regarded as debilitating cultural patterns. To use an expression coined by Anthony Appiah (2005: ch. 5), moral reform would be a type of "soul making" that a state might engage in to help citizens lead more successful lives. The idea behind moral reform is that once the reform is complete, after the programs are over and the incentives and sanctions are no longer being applied, those who have undergone the reform process will now *govern themselves* in accordance with mainstream norms without further special interventions.

5. "Liberal" Moral Reform?

Social conservatives who advocate moral reform tend to view it (sometimes along with private charity) as the *sole* remedy for ghetto poverty, since they generally regard the basic structure of U.S. society as just and thus not in need of fundamental reform (at least not in an egalitarian direction). Libertarians would presumably not accept moral reform as a

[7] For a careful analysis of church-state collaborations in poor black neighborhoods, see Owens, 2007.

legitimate aim of government, at least when dealing with adults. They do not regard the state as having the authority to sustain or reform the moral character of adult citizens (though allowances for children may be permitted). Indeed, they generally believe that it is impermissible for government to take paternalistic actions and that the state's authority is limited to protecting basic rights. On their view, citizens should be free to have a bad character and to embrace self-destructive cultural traits, provided in acting on these dispositions they do not violate the rights of others. Moreover, libertarians generally do not believe the state should institute redistributive schemes to reduce inequality or social welfare measures to alleviate poverty, at least not using tax revenue.

But can *liberals*, given their basic values, consistently support moral reform? In speaking of "liberals," I am not talking about individual Americans' self-descriptions or party affiliations. I have in mind a political morality defined by a distinctive set of value commitments (which might be described as "egalitarian political liberalism"), a political morality from a tradition of thought whose canonical exponents include Kant, Mill, and Rawls. In this way, there will be "liberals" (as defined by their self-description or Democratic Party affiliation) who are not liberals in my sense.[8]

Thus, a liberal who supported moral reform would presumably view such measures as only *part* of the solution to ghetto poverty. State-supported moral reform would have to be joined with policy efforts to make the opportunity structure fairer and the distribution of resources more equitable. Liberals who accept the suboptimal cultural divergence thesis typically regard the relevant cultural traits prominent in ghettos as a response or adaptation to unjust structural conditions. The relevant injustices include pervasive racial discrimination (for example in employment, housing, lending, and law enforcement); diminished life prospects due to unfair economic and educational disadvantages;

[8] For a brief but particularly helpful discussion of the place of liberal political morality in American and British political history, see Dworkin, 1985: 181-204.

inadequate social services; and the fact that the social safety net is not large enough and has too many holes to catch all those who fall because of economic restructuring, recessions, and unexpected shifts in the labor market.

I will not directly discuss conservative or libertarian perspectives on moral reform in the ghetto, though some of what I will say has implications for these views. Liberals generally agree that the structure of U.S. society is unfair, though they obviously disagree about the extent of its unfairness. In fact, a number of prominent liberal thinkers hold that unjust forms of exclusion, unequal opportunities, and economic inequality produced and continue to sustain ghetto poverty (Fiss, 2003; Barry, 2005; Anderson, 2010). Liberals also tend to think that government should do something proactive about poverty, instituting feasible antipoverty measures as necessary. Some might therefore be tempted to accept (or, indeed, may wholeheartedly endorse) moral reform as part of the solution to the problem of ghetto poverty. My aim over the next few sections will be to argue that this liberal position is neither wise nor morally coherent. My argument will pivot around the idea of "self-respect."

6. Self-Esteem and Unjust Social Conditions

Self-respect is a value open to a variety of interpretations and definitions. John Rawls (1999: 386-391) emphasizes the importance of ensuring that citizens have an opportunity to develop a sense of self-respect. However, instead of using the term "self-respect" to refer to what Rawls has in mind, I will use "self-esteem" (a term Rawls uses as a synonym). Following others (Darwall, 1977; Thomas, 1978; Sachs, 1981; Boxill, 1992: 186-199), I want to distinguish this value from a different though related one that we might also want to call "self-respect," a topic I will turn to in the next section.

Self-esteem has two aspects: (1) a secure conviction that one's fundamental purposes (one's conception of the good) are worthwhile and (2) confidence in one's ability to realize these purposes. So, self-esteem is a kind of self-confidence—confidence in the value of one's basic ambitions and confidence in one's ability to realize these aims. Or, put another way, self-esteem is a combination of self-worth and self-efficacy. We have a healthy sense of self-esteem when we regard our fundamental ends as valuable and consider ourselves competent to secure these ends. We have a diminished or damaged sense of self-esteem when we think our plans in life lack value or we are plagued by self-doubt.

In any pluralist society, where by definition there is deep disagreement about fundamental values, citizens will often adhere to conflicting conceptions of the good life. But a *primary good*, again following Rawls, is something that any rational person can be expected to want regardless of his or her particular conception of the good. Such goods include liberty, leisure, income, and wealth. Self-esteem is a primary good because in its absence nothing may seem worth doing or we may not attempt to achieve those things we regard as valuable. Apathy, depression, and despair may take over. Moreover, one generally feels shame when one experiences an injury to one's self-esteem. This shame is a response to one's failure to exhibit the personal qualities one regards as most worthwhile.

Rawls views self-esteem as a *natural* primary good, rather than a social one, because society, and in particular the state, has no mechanism for distributing self-esteem directly.[9] However, there are *social bases* of self-esteem that a social structure can either support or undermine. One's sense of self-worth (the first component of self-esteem) is socially supported when those one admires appreciate and affirm one's values and achievements. One will usually develop and maintain a sense of self-worth provided one

[9] Some people have lower self-esteem than they otherwise would because of clinical depression, which can sometimes be effectively treated. Government could enable those who need it to get access to such treatment. But this is not the same as distributing self-esteem; it is a way of repairing damaged self-esteem.

belongs to at least one association or community within which one's activities are publicly affirmed. These associative or communal ties also strengthen self-efficacy (the second component of self-esteem), for they reduce the likelihood of failure and provide collective defense against self-doubt when failure does occur.

Rawls maintains, and I agree, that in a just democratic society with a pluralist ethos, there will be a diverse array of informal communities and formal associations, and that the members of these groupings will develop ideals that cohere with their aspirations and talents. The question that I want to address, which Rawls does not deal with, is what should we expect in an *unjust* society? In an unjust society there may also be a variety of communities and associations with their own ideals, and these forms of group affiliation may also develop among those who are severely disadvantaged. Moreover, the cultural traits that characterize some of these communities and associations may have been cultivated in response to, or otherwise shaped by, the unjust institutional arrangements. These associations and communities may nevertheless perform essentially the same social function—namely, sustaining and enhancing self-esteem—as their counterparts under just arrangements.

7. Self-Respect and Unjust Social Conditions

Self-respect is to be distinguished from self-esteem. Self-respect can be an element of a person's sense of self-worth. But, unlike self-esteem, the role it plays in constituting self-worth is not contingent on a person's particular ambitions or self-confidence. Self-respect is a matter of recognizing oneself as a rational agent and a moral equal and valuing oneself accordingly (Hill, 1991: ch. 1; Boxill, 1992: 186-199; Sachs, 1981). Self-respect is embodied and expressed in the way one conducts oneself. Those with self-respect live their lives in a way that *conveys* their conviction that they are proper objects of respect. For example, they

resist the efforts of others to mistreat them and openly resent unfair treatment. Moreover, persons with self-respect do not believe that they must *earn* just treatment through, say, some display of virtue or personal achievement. They know that their capacity for moral agency *alone* is sufficient to justify their right to justice.

When self-respect is healthy and widespread in a society, this helps to sustain just practices and to deter injustice. And where there is systemic injustice, the self-respect of society's members often moves them to reform their institutions. Thus, those with a robust sense of justice should be concerned to maintain and foster self-respect in themselves and others.

However, self-respect has value quite apart from its contribution to maintaining or establishing a just society. Its value should not be reduced to how it promotes the general welfare or greatest good. Moral agents are permitted to preserve, express, and strengthen their self-respect even when doing so would not ameliorate unjust conditions, would not lighten their material burdens, and would be personally costly or risky. Self-respect is thus best understood as a component of a non-consequentialist moral outlook (Kamm, 1992). As the philosophers Thomas Hill (1991: ch. 1) and Bernard Boxill (1992: 186-199) have argued, the person who lacks self-respect fails to have the right attitude about his or her moral status. By putting up with injustice without complaint or protest, one does not give morality the regard it merits. This conception of self-respect focuses on the need to show respect for moral requirements. But those most burdened by injustice have additional reasons to preserve and express their self-respect.

Maintaining one's self-respect in the face of injustice is not simply about respecting the authority of morality. The sense of personal investment in such respect would be inexplicable if self-respect were merely about respecting moral principles. Self-respect has value from a *personal* point of view and not only from an impartial vantage point (Scheffler,

1982). A life lived without a healthy sense of self-respect, particularly for one who is oppressed, is an impoverished life *for the particular person whose life it is*.

Oppression can erode a person's sense of self-respect, causing one to doubt one's claim to equal moral status. We can understand an *attack* on one's self-respect as an action, policy, or practice that threatens to make one feel or believe that one is morally inferior, that one does not deserve the same treatment as others. As a result of such attacks, one can come to have a damaged sense of self-respect. To maintain a healthy sense of self-respect, the oppressed may therefore fight back against their oppressors, demanding the justice they know they deserve—even when the available evidence suggests that justice is not forthcoming. They thereby affirm their moral worth and equal status.

Agents that take action to affirm their moral standing often take *pride* in such actions, particularly when these acts entail some personal risks or costs. When one is subject to persistent injustice and yet successfully defends one's self-respect, this is a moral achievement. A robust disposition to resist attacks on one's self-respect can therefore be a source of self-esteem. Such self-valuing is *moral pride*. Conversely, submission to injustice can be a culpable failure that generates *moral shame* in the subject. We surrender or sacrifice our self-respect when we acquiesce to mistreatment or when we suffer such indignities in silence.

Persons with a strong sense of self-respect sometimes refuse to cooperate with the demands of an unjust society. They stand up for themselves, are defiant in the face of illegitimate authority, refuse to comply with unjust social requirements, protest maltreatment and humiliation, and so on, *even when they know such actions will not bring about justice or reduce their suffering.* Self-respect, then, can be a matter living with a sense of moral pride *despite* unjust conditions.

Though self-respect has intrinsic value and great moral importance, it should not be treated as a trump in moral deliberation. Moral agents need not defend their self-respect at all cost. It is sometimes justifiable or excusable to sacrifice a bit of self-respect to protect others from harm, to avoid grave harm to oneself, or to achieve some worthy goal. Such sacrifices are sometimes necessary, all things considered. However, the agent with a healthy sense of self-respect experiences them *as sacrifices*—as the painful loss of an intrinsically valuable good. When you no longer care that others are wronging you, putting up no resistance, or when you routinely trade fair treatment for mere material gain or social status, you have lost all self-respect.

With these remarks as background, I can briefly state my principal objection to moral reform: Even if the suboptimal cultural divergence hypothesis is basically sound, moral reform attacks the ghetto poor's social bases of self-esteem and fails to honor their need to preserve their self-respect. These two consequences create serious practical limitations and moral pitfalls. Moral reform is furthermore incompatible with respect for personal autonomy—i.e., with an agent's legitimate claim to govern his or her own life as that agent judges fit. In the remainder of this chapter, I will elaborate on these concerns and then close by sketching an alternative approach that I believe avoids these difficulties, is more in line with core liberal values, and is more likely to be effective in achieving the needed cultural and structural reforms.

8. The Practical Limits of Moral Outreach

As outlined in sections 3 and 4, the methods of moral reform vary greatly. One class of methods, which we might call "moral outreach," relies on dialogue, lectures, sermons, education, training, and counseling. The idea is to effect a change in cultural patterns through, for example, moral exhortation, role models, counseling services, educational

programs, or faith-based efforts. Some of these interventions amount to no more than attempting to convince some among the ghetto poor that their cultural ways are harmful to themselves and others. Other interventions might seek to make some residents of ghettos ashamed of their suboptimal mores, to encourage them to take pride in exemplifying mainstream values and identities, or both. This could be supplemented with attempts to get targets of moral reform to identify less with suboptimal ghetto cultural patterns and more with the successful habits and values of middle-class persons.

The main challenge for moral outreach is getting its targets to listen to these appeals and to take advantage of these programs. Moral outreach would seem to have the best chance of success with those for whom the weak version of the cultural divergence thesis applies—those who strategically employ ghetto-specific cultural repertoire only because they believe they lack a fair opportunity for socioeconomic advancement. For then, assuming more favorable circumstances, some willing cooperation with moral reform programs could be expected. This cooperation might be forthcoming once the opportunity structure was sufficiently fair such that the ghetto poor could escape poverty if they embraced more mainstream cultural ways. There might also be some willing cooperation if those targeted for moral outreach were looking for *any* escape from ghetto poverty, even if, for example, the opportunity structure remained unjust and thus most, no matter what they did, would remain in poverty and in deeply disadvantaged and segregated neighborhoods. The lucky few would only have to be convinced that there are more exits from ghetto poverty than there are people actively trying to leave.

But what if there are many who have suboptimal ghetto identities (i.e., those for whom the strong version of the cultural divergence thesis applies) *and* the social structure continues to be unfairly stacked against the ghetto poor? Here it seems that moral outreach would have limited success. After all, our conception of the good determines what we feel

ashamed of and take pride in, so shame and pride are relative to our fundamental goals and to the communities with which we identify. If putative targets for moral reform reject mainstream values and embrace ghetto identities, as the strong version of the cultural divergence thesis asserts, they will not be readily *shamed* into conforming to mainstream norms; nor should we expect them to take pride in embodying mainstream virtues. They will have developed alternative sources of self-worth that do not depend on mainstream institutions for validation.

A similar point can be made about self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is, again, confidence in one's capacity to achieve one's fundamental ambitions. Some among the ghetto poor may be confident in their ability to succeed, even by mainstream standards, *if the opportunity structure they faced were fairer*. Because they believe their efforts to meet mainstream standards of success are likely to be thwarted by a deeply unjust social structure, these persons may develop alternative ambitions (McGary, 1992). Where people blame the unfairness of the social structure for their inability to achieve their ambitions, they need *not* experience low self-esteem. And we have even less reason to suspect diminished self-esteem in those cases where, in response to their conviction that their society is unjust, people develop basic aims that they believe to be worthwhile and within reach.[10]

Indeed, the more those perceived as "outsiders," and official agents of the state in particular, attack ghetto identities, the more those who subscribe to these identities are likely to hold firmly to them. By hypothesis, there are distinctive forms of affiliation and community in ghetto neighborhoods that are central bases for the positive sense of self-worth of many among the ghetto poor. Those with ghetto identities will therefore demand a

[10] The argument of this paragraph and the previous one are offered on the assumption that not all ghetto identities are the product of false consciousness, rationalization, or bad faith. That is, I am assuming that these identities have not all been formed as an unconscious psychological defense mechanism against a debilitating sense of personal failure and individual incompetence. I take it that some ghetto identities are consciously adopted in light of the sincere and justified judgment that U.S. society is unjust and that the ghetto poor in particular do not have a fair shot in life as a result. For a classic defense of the view that some ghetto identities are rationalizations that stave off a sense of failure and incompetence, see Liebow, 1967.

compelling reason to change their conception of the good. In the absence of a more just opportunity structure, garnering the esteem of their more advantaged fellows is unlikely to be reason enough.

Recall that the focus of this chapter is on state-operated or state-supported moral reform. However, in response to the alleged debilitating effects of some ghetto cultural patterns, there are some who propose, not government intervention, but moral outreach on the part of black elites, a kind of group uplift or self-help (Loury, 1995; Cosby and Poussaint, 2007). Though such moral appeals may not be inherently objectionable, the strong version of the cultural divergence thesis suggests that this outreach would be rather limited in its effectiveness. Black elites are, in many ways, representatives of the mainstream. They exemplify its values and practices. Insofar as the ghetto poor are alienated from mainstream values, they are likely to look upon black elites with similar suspicion. This is all the more likely if, as I have argued elsewhere (Shelby, 2005: ch. 2), many among the ghetto poor believe that black elite moral exhortations are motivated less by genuine concern and group solidarity and more by elites' feeling embarrassed in the eyes of whites by the unruly behavior of poor urban blacks or by their fear that they might be mistaken for one with a ghetto identity.

9. Racism and Cultural Explanations of Black Poverty

There is a second practical limitation to moral outreach. Some of the cultural traits attributed to or associated with the ghetto poor (e.g., beliefs and attitudes toward authority, work, violence, parenting, sex and reproduction, school, and crime) resemble well-known racist stereotypes about blacks (e.g., their supposed tendencies toward lawlessness, laziness, dishonesty, irresponsibility, gross ignorance, substandard cognitive ability, parasitic reliance on government aid, and sexual promiscuity). Thus, an implication of the

cultural divergence thesis is that deeply disadvantaged and segregated metropolitan neighborhoods have produced a subgroup of blacks who, because of their cultural patterns, exhibit characteristics that racists have long maintained are "natural" to the black race and that these cultural traits are at least part of the explanation for why they are poor. I suspect that this implication is part of the reason many people are suspicious of, even hostile to, cultural analyses of black urban poverty—they smell like racist rationalizations for the status quo. To make matters worse, moral reform suggests that the ghetto poor are effectively incapable of altering these suboptimal traits on their own, as it calls for state intervention to change them. Moral reform programs, even voluntary ones, would be implicitly endorsing the idea that poor blacks have deficiencies that they alone cannot remedy. In an era when biological racism has been largely discredited and claims that blacks are biologically inferior are not publically acceptable, moral reform will inevitably strike many as the functional equivalent of classic racist doctrines.[11]

Perhaps such a response to moral reform would be cynical or unfair. The point I want to emphasize, though, is that many among the ghetto poor have reason to believe that some of their fellow citizens are attracted to cultural explanations of poverty because of racial bias. Regardless of their merit, the types of claims made about the black poor are often perceived as emanating not from genuine concern or empathy but from racial hostility or indifference to the plight of disadvantaged blacks. In light of this, some poor ghetto denizens may resist or distrust efforts to change the cultural patterns in their neighborhoods. Their suspicion would be well grounded, for some who advocate moral reform no doubt do so because of race-based contempt or a desire to maintain the racial status quo (Bobo et al, 1997; Holt, 2000; Mendelberg, 2001; Brown et al, 2003). On grounds

[11] It might be thought that a race-neutral moral reform policy that targets *all* poor people would not run into this problem. But this is not so clear. There is a long history of "race-neutral" policies with racist intent—from policies that concern voting rights to the criminal justice system to welfare—and most blacks would seem to be aware of this history.

of self-respect, then, the oppressed may refuse to avoid "confirming" the stereotypes that are often used to justify their subordination. In the absence of serious structural reform, the suggestion that the ghetto poor do not value hard work and education or that they do not respect the law and are irresponsible parents will strike some among the ghetto poor as yet another racist excuse for not improving social conditions in ghetto neighborhoods.

My point is a practical one: namely, *if* there are some among the ghetto poor who possess ghetto identities, as the strong version of the cultural divergence thesis supposes, then these persons are likely to dismiss outright or strongly resist attempts by representatives of the "mainstream" to undermine or alter those identities. Some moral reform efforts targeted at those with ghetto identities will therefore be self-defeating. So even if some poor urban blacks should be encouraged to abandon or change their ghetto identities, a different approach is likely to be necessary.

10. Moral Paternalism and Compromises with Injustice

Recognizing the practical limits of moral outreach, moral reformers may give up on this strategy or supplement it with more aggressive measures. Instead of relying on moral outreach alone, they may advocate cultural rehabilitation through a system of rewards and sanctions. This strategy would not depend on the willing or full cooperation of the intended beneficiaries. The moral reformers would attempt to arrange society's incentive structure to produce a deep cultural transformation in their subjects. Their subjects, however, may not (fully) realize what their benefactors are attempting to accomplish, or may not willingly go along, or may not desire the change in themselves the reformers want to effect. In this way, moral reformers work *on*, not *with*, the ghetto poor. Their methods are intended to be effective *despite resistance* from the black urban poor. Call this mode of moral reform "moral paternalism."

Many liberals find the idea of moral paternalism distasteful. In an ideal world, they would no doubt eschew it. But faced with current social and political realities and in light of their abiding concern to help the poor and disadvantaged, some may be tempted to engage in some forms of moral paternalism. For example, sympathetic liberals could argue that they do not urge moral reform because they believe the criticisms leveled at the ghetto poor are entirely fair or always spring from non-racist motives. They might simply insist that cultural traits that seem to confirm racist stereotypes make it harder (if not impossible) to generate the goodwill among the general public needed to change the structural conditions of ghettos. These liberals may lament the fact that too many Americans regard the ghetto poor as "undeserving" and that, on this ground, these citizens are unwilling to invest the necessary resources to eliminate urban poverty. However, without the support of at least some of these people, liberal structural reform is not feasible. In response to this political reality, some liberals may be prepared to attach stiff penalties to even minor legal infractions, to impose work requirements on welfare recipients with young children, to aggressively monitor and supervise the behavior of ghetto denizens, and so on, because without cultural and behavioral changes on the part of the black urban poor, structural reform will be nearly impossible.

I have serious doubts about the soundness of the social-theoretic assumptions behind any such strategy, in particular about whether reducing stereotypical behavior and attitudes will garner the desired goodwill. But even leaving this aside, I would insist that this "liberal pragmatism" threatens the self-respect of the ghetto poor. If, as some cultural analysts maintain, the suboptimal cultural traits of the ghetto poor are a response to societal *injustice*, then it is not reasonable to expect the urban poor to submit to moral reform to "prove" their worthiness for government interventions to improve structural conditions. Capitulating to the widely held and insulting view that they do not "deserve"

better life chances is fundamentally at odds with the ghetto poor maintaining their self-respect. Fair treatment and just social conditions are things they are entitled to in virtue of their status as moral equals and rational agents and cannot be justly withheld on account of their (alleged) unconventional identities or values. The ghetto poor have legitimate justice claims against their government that are not negated by what they do in response to that government's historical and still persisting failure to honor these claims. As Rawls (1999: 273) rightly points out, as an equal citizen taking part in a system of social cooperation, each acquires legitimate claims on fellow participants as defined by just rules of political association. And we should not regard what a citizen is entitled to by justice as proportional to, nor dependent upon, the quality of his or her moral character.

However, since I accept that sacrifices of self-respect are sometimes justified, I may seem to have left myself open to the following rejoinder: sometimes advancing the broader cause of justice means compromising with particular injustices. Yes, such sacrifices of self-respect are distasteful and even painful, but they are sometimes necessary in the short-term to make progress in the long run. Threatening the self-respect of the current generation of the ghetto poor may simply be the price of the social reform needed to ensure that future generations do not grow up under ghetto conditions.

I do not deny that sacrifices of self-respect can be warranted. It may be perfectly reasonable for one to suffer some indignities to protect the vulnerable, to preserve one's life, or even to advance the cause of justice. What I reject is the idea that *others* are permitted to decide for you when you should make such sacrifices. It is one thing to ask or even implore the ghetto poor to sacrifice some self-respect to achieve needed social reforms. It is quite another to *demand* that they make these sacrifices on pain of penalty or to take measures that effectively *force* them to accommodate themselves to injustice. Moral paternalism robs the ghetto poor of a choice that should be theirs alone—namely, whether

the improved prospects for ending or ameliorating ghetto poverty are worth the loss of moral pride they would incur by conceding the insulting view that they have not shown themselves to be deserving of better treatment. Whether such sacrifices of self-respect are, all things considered, worth it should be left to those who bear the burdens of the unjust social system liberals seek to reform.

Moreover, using one generation of the ghetto poor as unwilling instruments to bring about justice for the next generation is wrong. We should not treat the ghetto poor as if they did not have purposes, including moral aims, of their own, as if they were mere things that can be turned to purposes, however noble, that we see as fit. As moral agents who should be regarded as equals, they should be sought out as willing participants in efforts to bring about just social conditions. In addition, *their* basic interests in equal liberty and respect should not be treated as tradable for welfare gains for *others*, not even when the beneficiaries are their descendants, as this would represent a fundamental compromise in their standing as equal citizens with moral rights.

However, a liberal proponent of moral paternalism might advocate such measures in ghettos, not as a cynical political strategy in a conservative era, but based on a sincere belief that certain cultural traits prevalent in ghettos damage the well-being of the ghetto poor, making their already awful situation worse. It might be held, for example, that the ghetto poor do not (fully) appreciate the devastating effect of these cultural traits on their lives. Moral paternalism, then, could be viewed as a compassionate response to suboptimal cultural divergence, even if some among the ghetto poor fail to see how such intervention is in their best interests.

Nonetheless, the poor in ghettos should find this stance condescending and offensive. Such paternalistic attitudes are fundamentally incompatible with the liberal value of respect for persons. The ghetto poor are free persons and so rightly expect to be

accorded the equal respect due all who have this status. Showing that respect means, among other things, regarding persons as capable of *revising* their conception of the good in response to good reasons and as capable of *taking responsibility* for their basic ambitions in life (Rawls, 1996: 18-20, 72-77). Apart from their interests in meeting their material and physical needs, persons have a fundamental interest in being treated with this kind of respect; and though the liberal desire to meet these other needs is laudable, this goal is not a sufficient reason to override their fellow citizens' claim to be treated as free and equal. In addition, paternalism, as is well known, is hard to justify under *just* background conditions. Paternalism toward a segment of society acknowledged to be victims of social injustice is all the more suspect.

11. Dignity, Injustice, and the State

There is however a third sense of "self-respect" (different from the two discussed in sections 6 and 7) that is relevant to our discussion, and which we might call "dignity." It also has two components: (1) the belief that, no matter one's circumstances, one should do whatever is within one's power to secure one's basic physical, material, and psychological well-being and (2) the will to act on this belief.[12] The dignified person is resilient in the face of adversity and does not allow hardships, *even unjust ones*, to make him or her feel totally defeated. Constantly wallowing in self-pity and feelings of helplessness, willfully engaging in self-destructive behavior, and no longer caring about whether or how one survives demonstrate that one does not value oneself sufficiently. When people sink to this level of degradation, as some living in ghettos arguably have, it is obvious that they need help whether they recognize this or not. Thus one might argue that moral paternalism, while *pro tanto* unjustified, is permissible in such extreme cases.

[12] Michele M. Moody-Adams (1997) suggests something like this conception of self-respect.

So let us suppose that some among the ghetto poor, unbeknownst to them, do need help freeing themselves from a culture of defeatism and debasement, and information and voluntary programs would be insufficient to the task. Still, I think it would be morally problematic for a person or organization, *qua representative of the state*, to presume to be the appropriate agent to provide this unrequested help, at least when this assistance takes the form of moral paternalism. The freedom of the ghetto poor is already constrained by unjust conditions, which the state has failed to remedy. It would add insult to injury for the state to further constrain their freedom with a view to preventing them from making themselves worse off. In short, the problem is this: *given its failure to secure just social conditions, the state lacks the moral standing to act as an agent of moral reform*. The state could perhaps earn this standing, but only after it had made real and sustained efforts to establish a just social structure, thus re-establishing its legitimacy and goodwill in the eyes of those it seeks to help.[13]

Moreover, what might appear to be a tragic loss of dignity might in fact be an affirmation of self-respect. Though their actions may seem to signify diminished dignity, those with suboptimal cultural characteristics might not have given up on life and might not be suffering from weakness of will. Rather, they could view their outlook as a realistic stance in light of their government's wrongful actions (from malign neglect to vicious assaults) and their fellow citizens' self-serving contempt. They might choose to accept the risks and bear the consequences of their cultural attitudes and practices rather than attempt to live in accordance with mainstream values while lacking the necessary resources and opportunities. And they might do so with a sense of moral pride. Perhaps what they most need and desire, then, is not unsolicited state-sponsored help but basic social justice.

[13] There are other circumstances under which it may be permissible for a public official (e.g., a social worker or police officer) to intervene paternalistically to help those who, because of unjust treatment by the state, have become incapable of helping themselves. For instance, this may be acceptable when the would-be benefactor is acting as a private citizen rather than in his or her official capacity as a representative of the state.

One way to respect this reasonable stance would be to acknowledge their prerogative to decide when their defiant behavior and suboptimal cultural traits are worth the personal costs and risks.

12. Moral Reform and Duties To Others

The position I am advancing does not rely on the dubious idea that the oppressed can never be morally criticized for how they respond their unjust conditions. Not all criticisms of the unjustly disadvantaged is problematic victim-blaming. Moral criticism of the ghetto poor is sometimes warranted or appropriate despite the unjust conditions that circumscribe their lives (Boxill, 1994; Shelby, 2007). Those mired in ghetto poverty, just like many among the non-poor, do sometimes have ambitions that are not in fact worthwhile but morally base and impermissible. They sometimes choose immoral means to achieve their legitimate goals. And they sometimes give undue weight in deliberation to some of their group affiliations. So, for example, it is morally objectionable that some seek to have children when they know they do not intend to help raise and care for them, that some use deadly violence to secure luxury goods and social status, that some degrade and sexually assault others, and that some allow gang loyalty to trump what should be overriding moral considerations like respecting the rights of others and assisting the weak and vulnerable. These bases of self-esteem are not worthy of our respect and are appropriately condemned.

Moreover, the ghetto poor, like the rest of us, have moral duties to others that are not voided because of unjust social conditions. So for instance we should all refrain from wrongful violent aggression against others and not abuse, endanger, abandon, or neglect the children in our care. There are, and should be, legal proscriptions against these wrongful actions, even when they are perpetrated by the unjustly disadvantaged. Accordingly, it will sometimes be permissible and even morally required for the state to use coercive means to

ensure that these duties are fulfilled and their corresponding rights protected. Thus, one legitimate rationale for intervening in the lives of the ghetto poor is to protect innocent persons, including children, from legally proscribed harmful immoral conduct. It is a requirement of social justice that the state play this role in the lives of those within the state's territorial jurisdiction. A state that fails to do so in a conscientious, impartial, and consistent way treats those under its rule unjustly, just as it does when it fails to secure a fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of socioeconomic cooperation. When this protective function goes unfulfilled under unjust social conditions, like those that exist in ghetto neighborhoods, the state compounds the burdens on the oppressed and undermines its own legitimacy in their eyes.

However, this raises the difficult question of whether moral reform of criminal offenders can be justified on the grounds that it is needed to protect third parties from harmful wrongdoing. So, for example, the cultural rehabilitation of criminals might be regarded as a crime prevention measure, as an effort to reduce recidivism. Or, more controversially, moral reform could be directed at parents that have abused or neglected their children. This abuse and neglect might be attributed to suboptimal parenting styles acquired through intergenerational or peer influence. Perhaps moral reform would be justified in these cases, though this isn't obvious. When the criminal justice system or children's protective services do intervene to protect the rights of persons against the wrongful actions of others, moral reform may not be needed, advisable, or even permissible. Behavior modification without cultural rehabilitation—e.g., punitive measures—may be all that is called for and justifiable. But I will not pursue this complex issue here, as it is not my principal focus.

My concern in this chapter is with how some cultural patterns in ghettos may hold back the socioeconomic advance of those in their grip and whether moral reform is a

legitimate antipoverty strategy. I am not addressing whether moral reform is an appropriate response to criminal deviance or parental maltreatment of children. State interventions aimed at ensuring that people fulfill their moral responsibilities to *others* have a different normative status from interventions aimed at ensuring that people do not harm their *own* interests. It is the latter rationale for moral reform that is the subject here. My objection is to moral reform whose objective is helping the black urban poor escape poverty.

13. Two Responses From the Political Left

Many on the political left are adamantly against state-sponsored moral reform, especially in the context of societal injustice. They believe that government should not be in the business of structuring the intimate lives or moral consciousness of embattled citizens but should rather focus its efforts on protecting basic liberties, ensuring a fair distribution of resources, and maintaining a just opportunity structure. There are two important leftwing responses to the cultural divergence thesis, both of which deny the validity of the thesis itself. The first insists that the cultural lives of the ghetto poor do not actually diverge from the mainstream (Reed, 1999: ch. 6). These leftists point out that the attitudes and practices associated with the ghetto poor—laziness, hedonism, devaluation of academic achievement, materialism, promiscuity, rudeness, substance abuse, lack of respect for authority, non-marital reproduction, irresponsible parenting, violence, and immorality—are also pervasive among the affluent and the vaunted middle class. The cultural patterns found in the ghetto are not specific to it but are part of a much broader cultural current within the United States. The difference, they maintain, is that the poor have far fewer *resources* than their more advantaged fellow citizens. This means that they are much less able to bear the costs of this lifestyle. Thus some of the burdens of the ghetto poor's choices (e.g., higher taxes, urban

blight, school disruption, and crime) are shifted onto those with greater means. Many among the affluent resent this fact and adopt a punitive, authoritarian, or paternalistic response to the disadvantaged living in the deteriorated urban core. But this resentment is unwarranted, for the distribution of benefits and burdens of social life in the United States is profoundly unfair and thus the responsibility for these "negative externalities" cannot be (solely) placed on the ghetto poor. Moreover, targeting the ghetto poor for moral reform is hypocritical, as many so-called mainstream Americans possess the same cultural traits they decry.

A second response from the left is to accept that the culture of the ghetto diverges from the mainstream but to insist that this cultural divergence is not suboptimal (Stack, 1974; Steinberg, 2011). According to this view, group cultures are adaptive collective responses to the structural environment. The ghetto poor are simply responding rationally to the constraints of high ghetto walls—though perhaps they do not conceive of their values and practices in such terms—with the result being, not a suboptimal culture, but a culture that fits the external environment. This culture would change, perhaps swiftly, with improved material circumstances and greater protection of civil rights, as the formerly poor would rationally adapt to their better conditions. Thus, if we tear down these walls, that is, change the social structure to make it more just, we would thereby effect a positive change in the culture of ghettos without having to resort to moral reform.

These two positions are important rivals to liberal moral reform. Though I will not assess them here, I mention them because they are alternatives worthy of serious consideration and because I want to distinguish them from the one I have been defending. I close, then, by briefly sketching a different kind of response to the cultural aspects of ghetto poverty, a liberal-egalitarian response that does not depend on denying the truth of the suboptimal cultural divergence hypothesis.

14. Self-Esteem, Self-Respect, and Collective Resistance to Injustice

I begin with the following normative premise. To be reasonably just, a liberal-democratic, market-based society must: (a) ensure that racial discrimination does not diminish persons' life chances, (b) maintain the conditions for fair equality of opportunity (i.e., eliminating, as far as possible, the effects of class origins on individuals' life chances and labor-market competitiveness), and (c) provide a guaranteed social minimum and adequate social services so that no one is forced to live in degrading forms of poverty. I realize many reject this liberal-egalitarian stance. My goal here is to articulate an approach to ghetto poverty from a liberal-egalitarian perspective, not to defend liberal-egalitarian values. I would also insist that, as a factual matter, these principles of justice are not currently realized in the United States (Shelby, 2007; 2012). If these two claims are correct, it will almost certainly take a progressive social movement to realize liberal-egalitarian ideals, for there is currently strong resistance (both from the business elite and the general public) to such reform and a lack of political will among many politicians. The key point I want to emphasize is that to build and sustain such a movement, which would require a large and diverse coalition, it will be necessary to enlist the active involvement of the ghetto poor. The effort to garner their cooperation faces a number of challenges, however.

One of these challenges is brought into focus by the cultural divergence thesis. The thesis holds, on at least some variants, that the stigma, blight, segregation, crime, lack of opportunity, and material deprivation of ghetto neighborhoods have shaped the ambitions, values, practices, and identities of the ghetto poor. In particular, a salient cultural attitude in ghettos (though not exclusive to them) is widespread political cynicism or apathy, a general belief that the social system is irredeemably corrupt and that meaningful structural change cannot be achieved. This is hardly surprising, since a familiar response to long-term,

second-class citizenship is an absence of civic engagement and an acceptance of unjust conditions as inevitable. If, as the cultural divergence thesis maintains, such attitudes encourage the development of corresponding social identities and forms of group-based self-esteem, then if a progressive movement is to emerge, it may be necessary for some of the cultural attitudes and practices of the ghetto poor to change after all. Without this change, the ghetto poor cannot be regarded as suitable allies in a collective fight for just social conditions.

The difficulty is how to effect this cultural change without undermining the self-esteem, attacking the self-respect, or calling into question the dignity of those who have been most burdened by social injustices. Are their considerations in favor of a change in cultural ways that it would be reasonable for the ghetto poor to accept? Considerations that threaten their self-respect, convey paternalistic sentiments, or question their dignity are not reasonably acceptable, for reasons I have explained. Moreover, as a practical matter, it might help the cause of social justice if alternative social bases of self-esteem were developed or made available without being coupled with a moralizing attack on ghetto cultural patterns. Even if their resistance to cultural reform is not entirely reasonable, many among the segregated black urban poor will naturally reject any suggestion that their cultural ways are having a corrosive effect on their life chances, for some have found meaning, solace, and self-worth in these cultural traits. In addition, as I have argued, the state lacks the moral standing to demand that the ghetto poor change their cultural perspective or practices, at least until it establishes a more just social scheme. So it falls to concerned private citizens and associations to convince the politically alienated among the ghetto poor that active political resistance to the current social arrangement is not futile, that organizing, mobilizing, and putting political pressure on government officials can yield positive results.

My suggestion, then, is to make an appeal (perhaps indirectly) to the self-respect of the ghetto poor. Since political resistance to injustice expresses and boosts self-respect, the black urban poor have reasons of self-respect to participate in a movement for social change. Those from the "outside" can point to these as reasons that the ghetto poor can reasonably accept. Because the injustices characteristic of ghettos are threats to the self-respect of the black poor—that is, these injustices can potentially weaken their confidence in their equal moral worth—engaging in a collective struggle for social justice with others similarly committed can restore or fortify the self-respect of the ghetto poor.

In addition, maintaining a robust sense of self-respect in the face of injustice can enhance self-esteem. Persons can increase their moral pride by successfully protecting themselves against threats to their self-respect. They can do this, not only through defiance of conventional authority and transgressing mainstream norms, but by protesting wrongs perpetrated against them, preventing others from violating their rights, or criticizing the beliefs and values that are used to justify their suffering and disadvantage.

Efforts to change the basic structure of U.S. society should include the ghetto poor, not just as potential beneficiaries of such efforts, but as potential allies. There are already grassroots organizations and activists working to empower the ghetto poor and to increase their political participation. These efforts should be supported, joined, extended, and emulated. Not only could this dramatically increase the numbers of those pushing for social reform, but it might also help to sustain or create alternative sources of self-esteem for those attracted to suboptimal cultural values and practices. Many could find self-worth, in the form of moral pride, in working together with others to bring about just social conditions. But for this to occur on a large scale, forms of political solidarity that foster a commitment to the values of justice and mutual respect would need to be strengthened. Consequently, each member of these political associations could have their activities

affirmed by the other members, thereby buttressing individual and collective self-efficacy. Provided these alliances produced some concrete political victories and realistic hope for further gains, the result might well be the creation of more constructive social bases of self-esteem than those the ghetto poor sometimes embrace today. Those who want to act in solidarity with the ghetto poor can therefore legitimately encourage them to find self-esteem in the joint pursuit of justice.[14]

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[14] For helpful comments on previous drafts of this chapter, I thank Eric Beerbohm, Lawrence Blum, Moshe Cohen-Eliya, Nir Eyal, Ethan Fosse, Marilyn Friedman, Christopher Jencks, Lawrence Lessig, Christopher Lewis, Jonathan Marks, Orlando Patterson, Brandon Terry, Andrew Valls, Daniel Viehoff, Erik Olin Wright, and an anonymous referee. Material from this chapter was presented at Emory University, Harvard University, Miami University, Michigan State University, University of Illinois Urbana-Champagne, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, University of the Witwatersrand, Washington University, and Yale University. I thank these audiences for their comments and criticisms. Research for this project was generously supported by the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University.

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